

PCA UPDATE

RADIOLOGY COVERAGE IN EMERGENCY ROOMS

June, 2000

The Patient Care Assessment (PCA) Committee of the Board of Registration in Medicine is concerned about problems that have resulted from the misreadings of plain films taken on patients being seen after hours in the emergency rooms (ERs) of hospitals, when contemporaneous interpretations by qualified radiologists are not routinely available. Serious clinical outcomes from such misreadings unfortunately have occurred.

The Committee believes that ideally all radiologic studies taken on ER patients should be promptly interpreted by radiologists. This could be achieved by appropriate radiology staff coverage in-house on a twenty-four hours per day/seven days per week ("24/7") basis, or by the use of teleradiologic technology to supplement standard hours of coverage. We recognize, however, that current limitations of resources may make this an unrealistic immediate goal.

We recommend that all hospitals with emergency services give this matter careful consideration and move towards the desired goal as quickly as resources permit. In any case, all hospitals should be continuously monitoring the interpretations of X-rays by ER physicians, and comparing them with the later official readings by radiologists. Discrepancies should be promptly identified, discussed and corrected. We also recommend that current radiology staff coverage in all hospitals include 24/7 availability on a thirty-minute on-call basis whenever ER physicians request special diagnostic procedures or need help with interpretations of plain films. We remind all hospitals that they have a continuing responsibility to report any serious, unexpected adverse events related to the misreading of X-rays.

The PCA Committee appreciates the assistance of the Massachusetts Radiological Society (MRS) in developing this PCA Update. The MRS supports the goal of prompt interpretation of ER imaging studies by qualified radiologists and is ready to serve as a resource to Massachusetts hospitals and physicians in understanding and implementing methods to achieve that goal.

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